

Copper-Wire Phone Service Could Be Forced Out

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A bill now working its way through the California Legislature would allow telephone companies to discontinue traditional copper-wire-based phone service. Advocates for rural counties say that's a bad idea for consumers in rural areas, some of whom will be unable to switch to wireless or internet-based phone services.

The bill could leave some rural residents without service, they say.

The Calaveras County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday will consider adding its voice to the debate by sending a letter to state legislators in opposition to Assembly Bill 2395.

Evan Low, D-Campbell, authored the bill. He describes the measure as a way to modernize the telecommunications industry.

"This legislation establishes a state policy for a clearly communicated, planned and orderly transition from the last vestiges of the outdated, and carbon unfriendly plain old-telephone-service network to modern, fiber-optic networks and services," he said.

Advocates for the measure point out that many consumers have already forsaken old fashioned landline service in favor of cellular phones or internet-based phone services.

In many rural areas, however, it isn't possible to call an ambulance or anyone else using a cell phone.

A report to supervisors by Calaveras County government staff members said, "Due to the rugged and varied topography within the county, large portions of the citizenry depend upon traditional landline services. The varied topography directly influences signal propagation and signal strength resulting in sporadic and intermittent wireless and broadband services."

The staff report goes on to say that cellular service problems were particularly evident during and after the Butte Fire.

"Even with the installation of temporary mobile transmission sites, fire recovery efforts have been hampered due to limited connectivity. Today, much of the burn area including Mountain Ranch remains without wireless services and therefore the community and surrounding vicinity rely completely on traditional landline service."

The proposed bill does require phone companies to conduct "education" and "outreach" to copper wire phone customers before withdrawing service, which could come as soon as 2020. Advocates for rural areas, however, say no amount of education will allow someone to switch to voice-over internet protocol or cellular service where it isn't available.

The law, however, would allow the California Public Utility Commission to temporarily order a company to continue providing copper wire telephone service in areas where no other service is available.

The Rural County Representatives of California, a lobbying organization whose 35 members include Calaveras, Amador, Alpine and Tuolumne counties, is urging its members to oppose the bill.

While some parts of California have well-developed infrastructure for alternative telecommunications, rural counties still need to expand their wireless and Internet infrastructure, RCRC said in a media release.

Lee Adams, RCRC immediate past chairman and a Sierra County supervisor, said, "Modern communications systems are either non-existent, unreliable, or cost-prohibitive in rural California. As a result, traditional landline phone service remains the backbone and most reliable two-way communication mode in many of our rural communities."

Calaveras County supervisors will consider the letter opposing AB 2395 during their regular meeting that starts at 9 a.m. Tuesday in board chambers, 891 Mountain Ranch Road, San Andreas.

http://www.calaverasenterprise.com/news/article_262556c4-1e16-11e6-af73-6709a51f78a3.html